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To Richard Burton Tilden
from Constant Stanyan
with great regard.

April 1905

THE MISSION OF BEAUTY

CENTURY-CO
2 Feb 1910

THE MISSION OF BEAUTY

A POEM

By CARLETON SPRAGUE

1905
THE MATTHEWS-NORTHRUP WORKS
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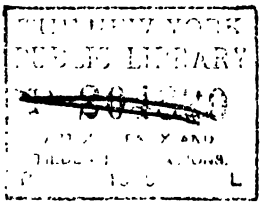

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NOTE

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I
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I

BEAUTY

O, subtle touch divine,
Caress of God,
His hand laid lightly
On the wakening world,
His word soft spoken
Unto awed mankind:
Beauty,
Thou tender mantle Nature weaves
For all her tenderer moods,
Protecting mantle Nature wears
In all her sterner ways:
Thou revelation clear,
God's pledge to earth
That life is not in vain,—
Along thy healing paths
Direct our steps,
Open our weary eyes
That we may clearly see,
Speak! and thy language
Make us understand,
Enter our hearts
And therein kindly dwell.

II

NATURE

In lavish splendor through His worlds,
In infinite variety,
Redeeming beauty reigns
And naught in Nature lacks.

In grains of dust invisible;
In stern heights piling heavenward;
In pencil touch on throat and wing;
In sweeping strokes of sunset hues;
In blue arched dome of summer noon;
In deep blue dome of summer night,
Whose silent, age defying stars
Deny our mute, unspoken cry
For light, more light,
Ere we too die!
And on and on
The great, still harmony rolls,
And the morning breaks,
And the big, hot sun
Restores, renews, and answers —
Life, more Life!

In secret petals
Mountain grown in chasms inaccessible;
In gardens where the single rose
With sheen of circling dove competes;
In forests deep, dark, murmuring
With whisperings of the night;
In lacework of wide spreading trees,
Pale moonlight filtering through
And sparkling on sad Evening's tears
The gently fallen dew;
In bending, sighing, storm rocked pines,
That catch the music of the winds,
And rearing high their crested tops
Sing in earth's symphony of sound;
In myriad moss and lichen forms
That carpet earth's untrodden ways,
Where dwells a marvellous insect world,
Unknown, unseen, that wondrous life,
That counterpart of fairyland;
In every growing, life stirred thing;
In every beat of every wing;

In poise of startled, listening deer;
In glistening rush of gleaming fish
That thread the many mooded sea,—
Now sunlit, trackless, blue and mild,
Now surging, dark, relentless, wild,—
Eternal mother in whose heart
All waters find their final goal;
In cool, secluded mountain lakes,
Where live again in azure hues
The grassy shores and rocks and hills,
And high set peaks of mountain land;
In hurrying, sparkling, forest streams
That add their constant tribute
To the deep, wide river,—
Flowing now, in placid stream,
By well tilled shores,
Now torn in steep, and rock strewn bed,
With flashing, broken spray tossed high,—
Now, seeming poised,—
As suddenly,
With swift, relentless, sweeping rush,
It falls with palpitating roar,
Far down the sheer cut precipice,
And carves its course through canyons deep
Down to the mighty inland lakes,
Down to the ocean's outstretched arms,
To lose itself, at last, far off,
In the engulfing sea;

In fertile valleys forest bound,
    Where gleams the green of succulent spring;
In fertile prairies golden toned,
    Their wide spread acres lost to view
In shimmering growth of harvest suns,—
    Those fertile lands, where, year by year,
Is writ, as on a fading scroll,
    In track of furrow, tramp of feet,
The story of man's husbandry;
    The crop is garnered, cold and frost
Erase the story of the toil,—
    The spirit of the conqueror
Survives the generations through!

O, endless wealth of loveliness
So lavished on our blinded view,
Our halting words inadequate
Fail utterly to speak thy due;
We live our little span, constrained
By limits set beyond our will,
We fail, and fall, and fear, and hope
With inward view, nor see until
We raise our gaze, then meets the eye
The bow that God has set on high.

III

LIFE

The miracle the first man saw
In endless repetition we too see,
But appreciation due
In long familiarity is lost;
Wise Nature's law, affinity,
Love, union, birth,
The seed, the soil, the sun,
The gentle rain from heaven,
The miracle and mystery of kindled life!
These wonders on a sudden
Burst upon our view,
And all life's beauty thrills us through
With throbs of happiness and awe,
Uplifts the sympathetic mood
And bears the soul on outstretched wings
Aloft to regions high of larger view,
Aloft to regions vast of understanding mind.

Our vision clears, the Spirit hovers near;
We see it rest upon true lovers' vows;
Upon pure love
We see it press its precious kiss
To consecrate a new life's dawn;
It glorifies the mother's eyes
That confident the future view,
Wherein she sees that nestling form
With virtue, goodness, wisdom clad,
A fearless, conquering, well girt knight,
Redressing wrong, upholding right,
The victor
Crowned at honor's goal.
Rejoice! O, winners in the race,
And every laurel leaf rejoice!
And every vein of every leaf,
And every vein of every stem,
The Spirit folds you in her wings!
Those wings that touch the maiden's face
And softly wave her sunlit hair,
And gently sweep her graceful form
So subtly moulded, hand of man,
With brush and chisel, vainly strives
To cast in more enduring mould.
Fair attitude and vision fair,
Thy fortune is the future's bond;
Men kneel before thy shrine and pray
For worthiness, for purity,
For absolution and for thee;
Goddess adored, vision supreme,
The world grows dark and cold
While they, in all unworthy
Save in love,
Trembling and faint, cowards to hear,
From ice to fire
Leap at thy soft spoke word.

We see it in the radiant face
    Of budding manhood
Looking out along life's pathway but begun;
    His manly vigor shines and glows
With every muscle well in tune,
    And all the complicated scheme
Of marvelous structure
    Beats and bends
In unison complete and weird
    To the controlling mind;
And every mountain looks a hill,
    And widest rivers, tiny brooks,
And densest forests, pleasant glades,
    And fiercest beasts and birds seem tame;
And all the yawning gulfs are bridged,
    And every man stands forth to lend
A helping hand along the way,
    Along the way where flowers grow.
No wonder
    All the gods are young,
No wonder
    God is made a man,
The perfect man has lived,—
    Was God!

We see it in strong purposed men,
The product of the life matured,
Through face revealed
Where conquering strength
Has set the print of victory;
All fallen foes forgiven are,
The summit stands in clear outline,
Strong, well poised, sure,
Trained and controlled,
Revered, respected, resolute
To listen, answer, and to act;
The crisis rises, lesser men
Stand trembling, pale, inadequate,
Dreading the future's unknown fate,
Powerless to think, to speak, to do;
Then stands he forth
And hope is bred,
And craven fear retreats, abashed,
And sullen envy reason learns,
And discontent to reason turns,
In wise and generous leadership
An honorable peace is born;
While by his side,
Hand strong in hand,
A woman wise sustains, upholds,
A woman counsels, cares, consoles.

Ah, Love,
Upon the altar of thy happiness
This day, dear heart,
Once more
I consecrate my love for thee;
For all the treasure of thy constant love,
Which year by year, unstintingly,
Thou givest me so far beyond my due,
I only bring the tribute of my love;
Wherein this gladdens thee,
Wherein it adds in any way
To thy dear life, which, day by day,
I watch unfold, expand, and open to my view
The fruits of all thy well spent years,
The fruits of thy maturing mind,
Thy goodness, wisdom, charity,
Unselfishness and self restraint,
Thy sweetness and thy modesty,
Therein, dear, am I glad;
And always when I fail, dear heart,
To be
That which thy love
Has made it possible
For me to be,
Then in thy charity,
Once more forgive,
And of thy treasure
Give me yet again.

Old Age

The shadows lengthen, day declines,
From out the hush
A wondrous stillness reigns,
From out the dusk
A wondrous peace prevails;
An influence benign
O'er hill and vale serenely rests;
Breathless, suspended,
Evening-tide, calm and content,
Awaits the enfolding night;
The boisterous winds
Have sped to brighter suns
Their flying steeds;
The mounting clouds, in dark dismay,
In heaven's far confines huddled,
Hide their disastrous breath;
The chariots of the sun
Beyond earth's borders flee,
Summoning new lands to life
And warmth and stern activity.
Enthroned in age,—
Before the darkness falls,—
O, Spirit,
Hear our prayer on bended knee;
Thy crown of peace be ours,
Wrought from the gold of pure desires,
Studded with gems of good accomplishment,
Untarnished by the breath of all unworthiness,
Strong in the interwoven strands
Of charity for all,
Peace and good will to men.

Death From earth to leaf,
To earth and ash;
The sword suspended falls,
The golden thread gives way,
The tiny flame burns dim and fails;
The final dreaded mystery
Stands out before the expectant soul;
O, Spirit,
Childlike make our final sleep;
The key is thine,—
Against the greater knowledge
Rises the portal vast,—
Rare spirits forge the key,
The key is love;
Strong in the strength of it,
Borne on the wings of it,
Step the undaunted
Forth
Into the dark.

IV

MIND

Out of the whirl of worlds,
    Out of the hand of time,
Order evolved;
    Out of the birth of man,
Out of the rise of man,
    Law of his life;
Out of the grain of sense
    Man's highest recompense
Reasoning mind;
    God, Thou hast ordered it,
Thine is the law of it,
    Beauty the awe of it
Thine be the praise.

Limitless, eternal,
Space bounded by space,
Age piling on age, endlessly,
Vastness inconceivable, infinite:
Hot whirling nebulae,
Mother of suns,
Parent of planets,
Set in fixed courses,
Turned to the harmony
Of plans eternal:
Birth of great teeming lands,
Molten and barren:
Birth of wide waters,
Seething and vaporous:
Age of the giant plants,
Age of the monster life;—
Step rising on step
Higher yet higher;
Man last in all the scale,
Pausing an age,—
God's moment,—
Waiting a destiny
Felt in rare hours,
Low whispered prescience
Of loftier life.

The winter passes, magic powers
    In silence stir all slumbering life,
The potent bud unfolds and flowers
    To leaf and fruit, and branch and stem;
And bird calls bird, and bee seeks blossom,
    And every timid, wild born thing,
By appetite and instinct led,
    Pursues the way of fate ordained.

Amidst these moving marvels
Man
Alone perceives and understands,
Alone in his high heritage
The privilege of Mind.
Born to an unstable grasp
Of a short allotted day,
Cast out on existence's sea,
Saved by that one attribute,—
Power from a source supreme,—
Man divinely justified
For his right to be.
Secrets of life's hidden wonders
Slowly to his mind unfold,
Glimpses of the mighty power
Which shall lead the race to truth;
Spirit of the law of beauty
Thine the star to light the way,
In thy fair and perfect image
Man shall test his right to live.

Into his hands committed earth's millions,
    Generation following generation
Time without end;
    Out of his hands flowing
World weal for woe;
    Reason succeeding instinct,
Order quelling riot;
    Out of the seething mass
Of men savage, men lustful, men brutal,
    Out of their envy, out of their hate,
His to evolve order and tolerance,
    Justice and temperance, liberty and peace,
Laws for the common good;
    His to evolve charity and patience,
Benevolence and mercy,
    Virtue and the sacrifice of self;
Wise government of united peoples,
    Honesty and chastity,
The joy of work, the joy of play.

Nature the prodigal,—
    Millions unfruitful,—
One seed to beauty flowers,
    One man in wisdom blooms;
Rose begot of seed excelling,
    Violet joyous for a day,
Bloom unconscious for the ages,
    Waft their perfume for alway;
Captains and their hosts in armor
    Shining with the light of faith,
Brave, unselfish lives they offer,
    Dying that the right may live;
Toilers at the stubborn fortress,—
    Baffling heights where science hides,—
Silent battles fought in secret,
    Victory won by single hand;
Giant boulders burst asunder,
    Pure the crystal lies revealed,
One more costly jewel added
    To the diadem of truth.

Deeper delving, higher climbing,
More revealed and clearer sight,
Man with added knowledge marching
Towards the goal which fades from view
In the mists which veil life's secrets,
In the sunset's gorgeous hues,
Where the pathway leads in splendor
To the citadel of light,
Whence man's heavenly given power
Shall so wisely rule mankind,
Peace of heaven on earth descended
Through the miracle of Mind.

V

ART

Light of the summer sun,
    Breath of the wandering breeze,
Rain of the vaporous sky,
    Earth's beauties multiply
In nature's perfect plan.
    Born of the ardent mind,
Imagination,—fruitful child,—
    Striving for utterance,
Raises the works of man
    Into the lofty realm where beauty dwells,
Into the kingdom where
    Art sits enthroned.
Virgin, high and fair and pure,
    At thy feet thy votaries
Sit in all humility,
    Listening for thy sacred word,
Listening for thy sacred note,
    Watching for thy sacred fire.
Thine the magic wand to change
    High built dome to shrine of God;
Thine the vital soaring flame
    Which instills cold sculptured clay
With the living, breathing fire;
    Thine the tender touch which guides
Stroke and brush of master hand;
    Thine the magic tongue which speaks
In enduring words of men;
    Thine the holy beat which throbs
In the highest note of song.

Architecture
The Temple of Juno at Girgenti

Faced to the light
Of the declining day,
Glowing with rosy tints,—
Those first fair promises of sleep,—
Set on commanding heights
And born to proud command,
Through twice twelve hundred years
The pillared temple stands.
Out of the East the builders came
And on the shining shore
Of the wide inland sea
They pitched their camps,
Then builded to the gods
As they were wont to do on Attic shores
Where beauty held its sway.
Mighty the task
By mighty minds inspired,
And great was their content,
For in their hearts they knew
That what they did was good
And pleasing to great Jove,
To whom they made
The living sacrifice of beeves
And full libations poured of ruddy wine.

On nestling slopes and pleasant plain
    The teeming city life
Was born and grew,
    And waxed and waned in power,
And throbbed
    With love, and hate, and wealth, and pride.
Then from the North
    And from the South
Came warring hordes
    And stilled the urban heart;
And in their lust
    They smote and killed,
And left nor town nor man.
    But through the softening years
The kindly hand of nature
    Laid a pall of flowers wild,
And grasses of the field
    Upon the land,
And to the fertile soil
    The nestling slopes and plain
Once more returned.

Against the temple high,—
In impotence and fear,—
The leveling blow was stayed;
Nor heavy hand of time,
Nor wanton war, nor covetous man,
Nor surging winter blast,
Have ruin wrought complete;
In majesty and grace to the admiring day
The roofless columns rise,
In mystic splendor to the moon,
The phantom of the past
Raises its broken shafts,
While the confiding wind
Whispers the tale through centuries told,
And every listening ear hears,
And all men understand;
While far below,
Beneath the selfsame stars,
The silver sea the triremes rode
Sounds on the selfsame shore.

Sculpture Michael Angelo's Greek Slave

Through untold years a slave
By thought set free;
To stand again a slave,—
The dead stone vibrant, throbbing,
Impotent against the encircling bands;
What man art thou!
An image merely, made of stone!
A faithful counterfeit of living flesh!
Enduring copy of a transient life,
Limb like to limb,
And every feature
But the duplicate of an external man,
So deftly done
The one who sees
Is lost in wonder
At the external likeness!
Or, in thee shall we see,—
Closing the visual eye
And letting fancy free
To revel in the halls of our imaginings,—
The soul of man
In eagerness and all in vain
In combat to be free;
Unending strife to 'scape the encumbering clay,
The secret learn,
And in the perfect peace of perfect knowledge
Strong and assured
To rest content.

Or spirit of the good
Entangled in the mesh of all the evil nets
Set for unwary man;—
The strife perpetual
Which is the cost of righteous living;
Or what thy hidden tale!
A mean, bound slave art thou!
Then whence thy subtle power
To set men free,
To loose them from themselves,
To summon from their minds
Their unused consciousness of higher things,
To light appreciation's lamp
Upon the altar of dulled senses,
So that joy to beauty wed
Steeps men in self-forgetfulness,
Enthralls and glorifies their lives
For one brief hour
In beauty's realm in thee create!

The master set thee free;
Thy moulded form,
Conceived in genius' brain,
Sprang from the rough hewn block
'Neath his unerring hand
Into thy quivering shape;
He breathed the potent spell upon thy brow,
And his the subtle power which dwells in thee,
Which lets thee laugh at death
From thy high vantage ground
Of art immortal;
And in thy presence makes men stand
In reverence and awe,
As stood the Greeks
In Attic days
Before the marble forms
Of living gods.

Painting Botticelli's Spring

Through sunlit woods where dryads dwell,
Beneath the blossoming trees
Where gentle birds to gentle mates
In tender song
Their loving hearts pour forth;
Where Pan unto the woods
Enchanted music makes,
Until all living things and earth and air
With happy chorus ring;
Where naiads live in sparkling, laughing streams;
Where placid pools reflect the summer clouds,
The flight of silent wings,
And quivering leaves and swaying boughs;
Where graceful ferns
'Neath tall stemmed lilies droop,
And daffodil and violet, like bright hued gems,
Earth's vivid green
Of crowded moss and new grown grass
Are patterned o'er;
Where all the hosts of fairy folk
Play in the glistening dew;
And where, — at intervals, — there reigns
A stillness so intense,
The sympathetic ear is filled
With that vast hymn of myriad sounds
Pervading earth and air,—
The blasts of all Earth's heralds
Blended in glorious melody,—
The splendid note that nature strikes,
Proclaiming —
Spring is come!

See where she stands!
Nor stands, but forward bends, so quietly
The eye of man no movement notes;
With flowers bedecked; — from bounteous store
She strews the earth,—
A maiden fair, smiling and tender;
Forces irresistible, in gentleness concealed,
Earth's fruitfulness portend;
Her sisters gone before, she heeds them not,—
The breath of icy March,
Nor April of uncertain mien,—
'Tis lovely May, a smile upon her lips,
And all the wealth of summer in her eyes;
Potent and powerful, gladly expectant,
Her destiny unfulfilled,
The maiden mother, calm and serene,
The parent of the yielding year.

Attend upon her now, ye summer days,
She gave thee birth, and light, and life;
Ye sisters three, in circling rythm
Tread out the langorous days
Of summer suns and vaporous skies;
'Neath starlit nights pursue your way
Through dewy grass and ripening fields,—
The winged messenger of love attends your steps,
And guards the birth, and light, and life of untold years;
Attend upon her now, ye autumn days,—
The end attained, the maid matured,—
Pluck from the laden boughs the ripened fruit,
And each shall be
The promise of another spring,—
The lovely, blushing bride
Of all the year.

Thus man,
His aspiration soaring in the heights of thought,
To find expression other than in words,
In deep sincerity has wrought;
Has builded monuments of use,
Added thereto all things of loveliness,
Cut from reluctant stone fair sculptured forms
Instinct with life and power,—
Products of minds trained in the school
Where beauty is the theme of all endeavor;
With brush and pigment reproduced
For man's delight
The passing scenes of life,
The face of those beloved,
And those ideal themes
Born and alive in brains imaginative,
To stimulate the one who sees,
To answer in responsive mood
The problems genius offers to his mind.

While in man's speech, and in his written word,
There dwells such marvelous power,
Such strength to sway whole empires,
To stir men's souls,
To bend them to the right,
To make them smile and weep,
And hate, and love, and pray,
That all the assembled hosts
Of glittering arms the world has ever seen,
In influence and potency,
To pygmies shrink
Before Christ's single word.

Play on, ye tuneful pipes,
    Add your deep harmony
To the inspired melody
    Which music lends
To beautify our lives.
    There comes a time when mere words fail;
Emotions, like the flush of morn,
    Elusive, swift, intangible,
The love light in the lover's eyes,
    The heart with speechless sorrow rent,
The formless prayer where aid is none,
    Thy province are.
Play on, ye pipes!
    Play martial airs, play hymns of praise!
They hear, the soldiers of the Cross,
    Play love, and joy, and peace
To all mankind.

VI

IMMORTALITY

In all, through all, which way we turn,—
    Part seen and understood, and part not fathomed,—
In us the fault may lie;—
    Great stretches far beyond our ken,
Where, groping darkly,
    Rises a cry of joy in minds surrendered,
Rises a cry for aid in minds dumfounded;
    Ever the tongue of man
Framing a word
    Born of his heart's desire,
Stay of his wavering sense,—
    Love! Christ! God!
Humbly we name it,
    Deep in our heart of hearts
Humbly receive it.

Whence come and whither bound
Denied us,
There is that within us tells the story;—
Far above the human life
A glory
Filled with wisdom infinite
Frames a plan majestic,
Sets the stars in Heaven,
Keeps them in their courses,
Wills the human sacrifice,—
Earth's poor contribution to the building
Of the consummation forged on high.
Seek ye the proofs?
Look to the beauty of the summer night,
See but the beauty of all living things,
Search in the beauty nature spreads,
Lavish handed, over land and sea,
Contemplate the beauty of the mind,
The lives of those who follow Christ among mankind.

Past usefulness,
Silently they fade away,—
The violet's petals, human heart beats,
The great white moon, — the phantom of a world, —
But in the ash of every sacrifice
There hidden lies
A grain of gold
Purified for the end inscrutable.

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Great heart beat of the eternal power,
What tiny drop of our poor blood
Can mingle in the mighty flow
Of life immortal!
Perchance an answer came
That Beauty is the name
Which holds the test;
If to the sum of things
The human being brings
Aught that can stand the rays
Of that keen, searching light,
Aught that retains a purity entire,
Such surely cannot die,
But to the heart eternal
Must rendered be.
That all unworthiness, that all unloveliness,
Through charity divine
Is lost in dreamless death,
Should that cause fear!
More dread in this,—
That all man's ugliness,
In that immortal beauty
Which is God
Should mirrored be.

Ah, Love, give unto me thy hand,
    Turn towards me thy strong gaze,
That I may read within those eyes
    The truth that therein lies,—
I cannot doubt,
    No beauty dies!
Thy hand in mine,
    Dear friend;
Courage!
    The failures were of yesterday,
Again the sun
    Shall rise.

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